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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000266

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, INR/NESA, DRL/CRA

NSC FOR E. MILLARD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/18/14

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [PHUM](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: Campaign Snapshot: PM lashes out at President in campaign kickoff speech; LTTE endorses Tamil grouping

Refs: (A) FBIS Reston Va DTG 180303Z Feb 04

- (B) Colombo 242, and previous

(U) Classified by James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) In this message, Mission reviews the following items revolving around Sri Lanka's April 2 parliamentary election campaign:

-- PM Wickremesinghe blames President Kumaratunga for cohabitation tensions in nationally televised address;

-- Actively engaging in the campaign, Tamil Tigers publicly endorse the Tamil National Alliance;

-- SLFP-JVP alliance names leadership group;

-- "The Flavor of the Campaign": Extremist SU party announces all Buddhist monk candidate slate.

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PM Hits out at President  
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2. (SBU) In a taped televised address given late February 17, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe lashed out at President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, laying the blame squarely at her feet for the long-standing cohabitation tensions between the two. He also accused her of calling parliamentary elections for sheerly political reasons and in the face of indications that the dispute between the two leaders over the control of the Defense Ministry was near resolution. In the approximately 20-minute address, Wickremesinghe also complained that the President's decision to call elections was "like kicking the will of the people." He then went on to defend the record of his United National Party (UNP) government, which has been in power the past two years. In doing so, he highlighted the advent of the peace process with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the country's relatively upbeat economic performance, and the beginning of enhanced assistance efforts by donors.

3. (C) COMMENT: The UNP has seemingly had a tough time getting its campaign off the mark since Kumaratunga announced early elections on February 7. Up until his February 17 speech, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe had not appeared much inclined to leap into the fray either, which no doubt had slowed down the UNP's campaign machine. With his February 17 speech setting a tough tone, however, the PM has effectively kicked off the UNP's campaign and, in the process, underscored that he will hit out at the President and defend his party's record in power. While low-key and technocratic in personality, the PM has a reputation as being effective on the campaign trail. END COMMENT.

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Tigers Endorse Tamil Grouping  
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4. (C) In comments carried February 17 on the pro-Liberation Tiger of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) website, "TamilNet," the group's political chief, S.P. Thamilselvam, endorsed the election candidate slate of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA). (The TNA is the dominant Tamil umbrella political grouping in Sri Lanka, with 15 MPs representing several parties.) At the conclusion of a meeting between the LTTE and TNA held earlier that day, Thamilselvam stated: "We unanimously decided today that the Tamil people should vote only for the Tamil National Alliance. This is the wish of our leader (referring to Tiger leader V. Prabhakaran) and our leadership." Also in the same statement, Thamilselvam seemed to retract earlier remarks that non-Tamil dominated parties like the UNP and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) would be prohibited from contesting elections in the north/east. Clarifying, he

said, "Sinhala parties can contest anywhere in the northeast. It is their freedom to do so. I only said that the Tamils might not prefer Sinhala parties." Thamichelvam made no direct comments on the battle between V. Anandasangaree -- an independent-minded Tamil leader -- for control of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) with pro-LTTE elements. (The TULF is the major constituent element of the TNA.)

15. (C) COMMENT: It has long been an open secret that the TNA is basically a pro-LTTE grouping. In the past, there were a multitude of Tamil leaders willing to take on the Tigers, but through coercion or assassination there are very few independent Tamil political leaders like Anandasangaree left. (There are several small anti-LTTE Tamil parties still operating, but they are of decreasing importance.) Even with that as background, the fact that the Tigers would come out in public and endorse the TNA is remarkable. It serves to highlight a newfound willingness on behalf of the LTTE to involve itself in political campaigns, in a direct, non-clandestine manner. In the meantime, although he backtracked to some extent, the overall direction of Thamichelvam's comments are that the LTTE considers the north and east the group's very own political preserve and parties in the south should understand that. END COMMENT.

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SLFP-JVP Alliance Names Leadership Group  
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16. (SBU) In a February 17 meeting, the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), which is the umbrella name for the SLFP - Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) linkup, appointed various officials to top leadership positions. President Kumaratunga took her place as the leader of the alliance, while fellow SLFP party members (and major political rivals) Mahinda Rajapakse and Anura Bandaranaike were named national organizers. (Rajapakse is the Opposition Leader. Bandaranaike is a senior SLFP MP and the President's brother.) Five vice presidents were named from among the spectrum of parties in the alliance, including: Dinesh Gunawardena, leader of the left-wing Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) party; Ferial Ashraff, leader of the Muslim National Unity Alliance (NUA); Sarath Amunugama and Nimal Siripala de Silva of the SLFP; and Vijitha Herath of the JVP. An additional four SLFP and one JVP members were appointed as assistant secretaries.

17. (C) COMMENT: It is interesting that the SLFP holds most of the UPFA leadership positions, including the top three, with the JVP seemingly accepting a decidedly secondary position in the alliance. This probably means that the JVP does not consider the alliance leadership positions all that important and just a matter for show. That said, the fact that Rajapakse and Bandaranaike were both named national organizers was a virtually inevitable solution to an endemic problem: both men see themselves as heirs to Kumaratunga's leadership of the SLFP and will not accept being upstaged by the other. END COMMENT.

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The Saffron Robe as Campaign Tool  
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18. (SBU) In our "flavor of the campaign" section: The Sinhalese Buddhist extremist party, Sihala Urumaya (SU), on February 17 decided to field a slate of exclusively Buddhist monk candidates for the upcoming parliamentary election. The party said it made this decision in order "to vest the monks with their traditional right to protect the inalienable rights of the Sinhala-Buddhist people." The majority of the 285 monks on the slate have long associations with the SU, with the balance being younger monks. SU leaders predicted that at least 10 of the monks would win parliamentary seats. The SU also announced that it has officially changed its name to the "Jathika Hela Urumaya," which roughly translates as National Heritage Party. The party's symbol will be the conch shell (the old SU symbol was a bow and arrow).

19. (C) COMMENT: The SU -- a minor party with no parliamentary representation -- is the most openly aggressive and communalist of the Sinhalese Buddhist extremist parties (much more so than the JVP which cloaks its extremism in leftist rhetoric). In nominating an all-monk slate, the party is making it clear that it plans to place the issue of Sinhalese Buddhist ethno-religious identity front-and-center in this campaign. Using the saffron robe in this political way may be of questionable utility, however. Since the country's independence, only one monk has served in Parliament and this monk -- Ven. Baddegama Samitha, who is now in office and running for election again -- is

pro-peace process. Monks taking a hard-line, SU-like anti-peace process perspective have had some influence on the public policy discourse, but no electoral success as candidates in the past. END COMMENT.

110. (U) Minimize considered.

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